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The U.S. Intelligence Team: How Well Does It Work?

"I told my people that I wanted to know about something before it happened. When I did, not it meant we were not doing our job, that it was an intelligence gap."

—William Colby, former director of the CIA
This is the first of two articles on the U.S. intelligence community.

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Newsday Washington Bureau

Washington—Top policy officials in the Carter administration say they are dissatisfied with the caliber of information analysis provided by the U.S. intelligence community.

Those officials, including White House National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski and Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, believe that the material reaching their desks often is not well analyzed and at times has failed to alert them to major developments in the world. Their concerns were made clear during a series of Newsday interviews with leading policy makers and their assistants, current and former intelligence officials, and intelligence experts on Capitol Hill.

"The United States does seem to have a particular fascination with technology and gadgets," Brzezinski said. "I would say that the American information-gathering techniques are the best in the world—the equipment is absolutely remarkable. But it is the analysis of the information that is so important. And I think there is not enough attention given to the ability to say what all the information that is collected means."

Secretary of State Vance also is known to feel that there is a problem. Vance says there is too much information and there is a need to decide on priorities and then to do a better job on the priority matters.

Officials of the Carter White House say they were not able to obtain timely or adequate intelligence analyses on such matters of international significance as the recent invasion of Zaire, the removal of Soviet President Nikolai V. Podgorny, and the strength of the conservative Likud Party in the Israeli election campaign, forecasting the possibility of a new hard-line era in Israeli leadership.

And the complaint is not limited to the new administration. Similar concern was expressed by officials of the Ford and Nixon years, especially on intelligence concerning such areas as Angola, China, Cyprus, Portugal, the Mideast and Vietnam. One of the most publicly critical of those former officials was Richard Nixon himself, who said in his nationally televised interviews with David Frost recently that the intelligence agencies at the State and Defense Departments, as well as the CIA, had provided poor information in Indochina and had failed to predict the start of the 1973 Yom Kippur War in the Mideast.

"I was not surprised to see our intelligence drop the ball," Nixon said, in talking about the Mideast war. "I thought basically that our intelligence community needed a shaking up."

In a series of interviews with Newsday, the intelligence experts cited several major reasons for the problem:

- There is too much emphasis on gathering information and not enough emphasis on analyzing what it means.

- The fragmented, bureaucratic structure of the intelligence community often prevents vital information from reaching decision-makers in timely and usable form.

- Intelligence agencies do not know what the decision-makers expect of them, in part because the decision-makers do not ask the right questions and make the right requests of the agencies.

- At times decision-makers receive good intelligence but disregard it for their own reasons of policy and/or politics.

Rep. Otis Pike (D-Riverhead), whose House Committee on Intelligence first publicly raised the question of the quality of intelligence, defined the problem this way: "The real question is: Are we getting timely knowledge in the proper fashion? Are the cost and the risk justified by the end product?"

About 80 per cent of the U.S. intelligence budget is spent on military affairs, according to an informed source. But now decision-makers are saying there must be greater emphasis in the intelligence community on political analysis. "They hate like hell to predict the future," one Carter national se-

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urity official said. "They don't want to accept it; but that is their job. That is what we expect of them."

Two of the staunchest defenders of the capabilities of the intelligence community, George Bush and William Colby, both former CIA directors, concede that there are major shortcomings in the system—but add that there are real problems in trying to satisfy the demands of decision-makers.

"There is a desire that we have a crystal ball," Colby, director of the CIA from May, 1973, to January, 1976, said. "The problem is that there are so many variables—if you understand that, okay."

"If the agency does not predict something that happens, that is an intelligence gap. I told my people I wanted to know about something before it happened. When I did not, it meant we were not doing our job."

George Bush, CIA director from January, 1976, to January, 1977, acknowledged one problem: The intelligence information collected is so voluminous that it cannot be properly analyzed and used by policy-makers. "I don't think the highest level policy-makers get swamped," Bush said. "But the middle levels have a helluva lot of information. It's a lot to sort and analyze."

Bush said he thought the CIA does, all in all, an "excellent job of gathering and analyzing." The CIA does have shortcomings and does make mistakes, Bush said, "but it could be that some of the problems are that leaders are not asking the right questions."

Newsday's interviews and congressional studies show a number of examples of major international events in which the intelligence community clearly has not met the needs of the policy-makers. Some examples:

Soviet Union, April, 1977: Administration officials now say they had no warning that the Soviet President Nikolai V. Podgorny was about to be kicked out of office. "That was no small step, it was a major event," one White House official said. "They didn't give us anything—nothing!"

The Carter Administration was criticizing the human rights situation in the Soviet Union and presenting a new strategic arms proposal without

knowledge that there was a major shakeup underway in the Kremlin. While it is quite possible that knowledge of those events would not have changed administration policies, officials say the information would have been helpful.

"If we knew there was an upheaval going on within the party, it might have told us something about the dissident situation," the White House official said. "It is the type of information that would have been useful to have." The White House finally received a CIA briefing on the Podgorny ouster on June 28—weeks after it had occurred.

Zaire, March, 1977: The administration received newspaper reports on March 8 that the copper-rich Shaba province of Zaire (formerly the Belgian Congo) was being invaded by unknown forces. Then, more than 48 hours elapsed before President Carter was given specific information about the invasion.

"We didn't know what was happening," the White House official said. "We had no idea who they were or what they wanted. We didn't know if there were Cubans or Russians involved.... We needed people on the ground we could phone or radio. There was no network of contacts. And there was no advance warning."

The question of Cuban involvement, of course, was key. At the time, the administration was actively pursuing improved relations with Castro.

China, November, 1976: Bush, the director of the CIA at the time, strongly defends the agency's record, but even he concedes that the rise to power of Hua Kuo-feng in mainland China was an event that the agency should have been able to predict.

"That is one area in which our intelligence has been less than we wanted," Bush said recently. "We couldn't predict the changes with accuracy. Hua was not fingered by our intelligence sources. We knew something about his background, but not all that much. And, most important, he was not cited as the next likely leader of China.... It is a valid complaint against U.S. intelligence."

Angola, September, 1977: While the U.S. government was making a clandestine effort to affect the outcome of the civil war in Angola, former aides of Secretary of State Henry Kissinger say that they were operating without knowledge of two important events: Cuba was planning a major military involvement and South Africa was planning "a whole organized intervention."

"We picked up the Cuban involvement early, but we way underestimated the numbers," one of the former aides said. "We thought the MPLA [the side supported by the Soviet Union and Cuba] was going down the tubes." With the help of about 15,000 Cuban troops, the MPLA won.

In addition to supporting the losing side, the United States was closely identified with the South African intervention—precisely the identification Kissinger had wanted to avoid. Two former intelligence officials confirmed that while U.S. intelligence was secretly working with the South Africans on Angola, the Americans were caught by surprise by the large-scale South African intervention. "If we had known, we might have gone to South Africa and said, 'What are you doing here? This changes everything,'" one source said. "Our intelligence was really very good during Angola—except for those two problems."

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Cyprus, July, 1974: Although government leaders clearly was caught by surprise by the Greek-led military coup that almost started a war between NATO allies Greece and Turkey. "Intelligence clearly failed to provide warning of the coup," the Pike committee report said. "And it performed indifferently once the crisis had begun."

Although there were many signs that a coup was possible, CIA reports continually downplayed the chances of its happening.

The CIA postmortem of that event, parts of which appeared in the Pike report, concluded: "Many reports were too technical to be understood by lay analysts. . . As in past crises, most of the customers complained of the volume of . . . reporting as well as its frequent redundancy. Many also complained of too little analysis of the facts, too few assessments of the significance of reported developments."

Portugal, April, 1974: The Pike committee study of the left-wing coup showed that not only did the intelligence community fail to predict the coup, it had failed almost completely even to alert decision-makers that there was a problem. The study said the Defense Intelligence Agency clearly failed to detect the unusual strength of left-wing military leaders though there were public signs of their rise to power and of their split with the right-wing government.

"There were plenty of signs," a former member of the intelligence community said. ". . . An article by a professor really had more information on the situation than we received from our sources . . . One problem was that nobody was paying any attention to Portugal, it was on the back burner. It could have been a disaster."

Mideast, Oct. 3, 1973: In his interview with David Frost, Nixon described how he found out about the outbreak of the war: "I was going to Key Biscayne at the time . . . and I got the intelligence report from the CIA that day. And the intelligence report said that an armed attack is possible, but unlikely. The next morning I got a telephone call from Washington that Egypt had attacked . . ."

Colby, the CIA director at the time, said there is no other way to describe it: "It was a blunder, an intelligence failure. We blew it."

The Pike committee concluded that the entire intelligence system had malfunctioned. "Massive amounts of data had proven indigestible to analysts," the panel said. "Analysts, reluctant to raise false alarm and lulled by anti-Arab biases, ignored clear warnings."

Arab Oil Boycott, October, 1973: The intelligence community failed to warn decision-makers of the boycott, and then after the boycott was imposed, did not accurately forecast its impact, according to officials inside and outside the community. "There was no specific warning that the boycott was about to take place," Herbert Hetu, the CIA's current director of public information, said in response to a question from Newsday. "They did not have that information."

And Sen. Adlai Stevenson III (D-Ill.), whose subcommittee is doing a detailed study of the boycott, said the economic analysis was disappointing. "The intelligence did not deal with the economic consequences," Stevenson said. "There were private sources that were making a much better analysis than the CIA: the oil companies and even the [British] Economist magazine."

07/03/Source familiar with the oil boycott situation, however, have told Newsday that they believe that Kissinger, through his personal shuttle diplomacy, was warned of the possibility of the boycott, but did not act on his information or pass it along to intelligence. The fact that decision-makers were not sharing information with intelligence also was cited as a significant problem by the Pike committee.

There has been one other major problem: interagency rivalry. In some of the examples cited above, the fact that military intelligence could not or would not cooperate with the CIA or the State Department led to fragmented or contradictory reporting. Bush offered one graphic example of the rivalry when he was director.

In the winter of 1975-76, when Kissinger was trying to negotiate a strategic arms treaty with the Soviet Union, the military said the Soviets' new Backfire bomber was a major threat to U.S. security and wanted strict limits placed on it in any nuclear arms control agreement. Kissinger was negotiating only to limit the deployment of the plane.

"The Air Force intelligence leaked a report that the CIA assessments of the Backfire bomber were wrong and weak," Bush said. "The thrust of the report was rather malicious and untrue, as far as I'm concerned. What was untrue was that it said the CIA was instructed by Kissinger to come up with estimates that the Backfire bomber could fly less far than it really could. The analysts were highly competent, professional engineering types. If anyone suggested to them, 'Here's your answer, now come up with it,' they'd blow the whistle on them."

Another case of interagency rivalry occurred last year, after President Ford gave the CIA director budgetary control over the entire intelligence community. A former top CIA official said that fighting over the new budget system became so intense that the agencies were withholding information from each other. The official said that since the new administration took over, that problem has abated.

Ultimately, intelligence gathered by all agencies is for the use of the President. At the White House, senior officials say they much prefer the daily intelligence analysis of the small State Department intelligence unit, the bureau of intelligence and research, to that of the CIA and the Defense Intelligence Agency. "INR gives us the best analysis," one White House official said. "It's more insightful. They focus on five or six items of interest . . . what it means, where it's going."

The man who heads that unit, Harold H. Saunders, who was a National Security Council official under Henry Kissinger, said the solution is not any plan for reorganization currently under discussion. Saunders said the intelligence community and the policy makers must communicate better. "The intelligence community does its work in a vacuum, just gathering facts, and not considering what the decision-makers need. And the decision-makers never define what it is they want," Saunders said. "The challenge is to bring the two together. Get the community more conscious of policy and the decision-makers asking the right questions."

NEXT: An Interview
With the CIA Director